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ABSTRACT

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by

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Social Support, Family Organization, and Adolescent Adjustment in Low-Income Puerto Rican Families

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Social support from kin has been discussed as an important feature of family life among Puerto Rican families (Delgado & Rivera, 1997; Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Hidalgo, 1997). According to Carrasquillo (1991), it is customary for households to be composed of extended relatives including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Carrasquillo has noted that grandparents are likely to live with the family and "are not seen as a burden, but as a blessing due to their knowledge, as role models for the children, or as people who can take care of the children during the parent's absence (p. 68)." Delgado and Humm-Delgado (1989) have suggested that in Puerto Rican families, the extended family system provides, among other things, crisis intervention, emotional support, companionship, childcare, and financial assistance.

Although these and other studies have argued for the importance of relations with the extended family and the support it provides in Puerto Rican families, little evidence has clearly demonstrated the links of kin social support to areas of adult or adolescent functioning. Hidalgo (1997), in a study of four Puerto Rican families living in Boston, reveals that through their extended kin network, mothers were able to more closely monitor their adolescents' behavior. Also, this work suggests that the mental health of parents may be enhanced by the support of kin. Hidalgo's work reveals that stress that mothers might otherwise have experienced was avoided through the help of kin with childcare and supervision of adolescents' behavior.

In relevant work with African American families who share some of the characteristics of the Puerto Rican families who participated in the preceding investigations (i.e., low income, extended family system), research has shown that social support from kin was positively associated with adolescents' adjustment through its positive relation to family organization (Taylor, 1996). Specifically, in families that could depend on adult extended kin to provide social

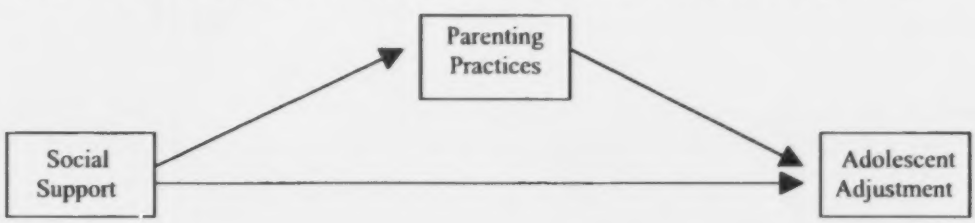
and emotional support, the home was structured and organized and parents were involved in adolescents' schooling. Adolescents in such homes, in turn, were more self-reliant, received better grades in school, and were less involved in problem behavior.

Family organization may be a mediator of kinship support and linked to adolescent adjustment because organized homes are structured and predictable. Boyce (1985) has suggested that social support may enhance parents' capacity to promote a sense of security and stability to youngsters through providing an organized family environment. Other research with both children and adolescents has shown that family organization is positively associated with school achievement and social competence (Clark, 1983; Hardy, Power, & Jaedicks, 1993; Slater & Power, 1987). Family organization may be particularly important to Puerto Rican youngsters because they live in many of the urban communities that lack structure, organization, and predictability, a result of their communities having been severely effected by long-term structural changes in the U.S. economy.

In the present study, we examine the association between kinship support, family organization, and adolescent adjustment in Puerto Rican families. It was expected that the more often mothers reported that they had the support of kin, the higher their adolescents' adjustment and the more organized and structured the home would be. It was also expected that the more organized the families' home environment, the higher adolescents' adjustment. Finally, it was predicted that family organization would mediate the association between kin support and adolescent adjustment. The conceptual model examined is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of the Association of Kin Social Support With Adolescent's Adjustment



METHODS

Participants

The participants were 165 Puerto Rican mothers and their adolescents (91 females and 74 males). The adolescents were, on average, 15.07 years old and the mothers' mean age was 38.22 years. The majority of families (79.9%) had incomes between $10,000–$15,000 and consisted of 4.5 persons. In terms of family structure, 43% of the families were two-parent families and 57% were one-parent families. The majority of the mothers (60.6%) were born in Puerto Rico and, on average, the mothers had been living on the mainland for 24.59 years.

Measures

Maternal Variables

Kinship support (8 items, alpha=0.84) was measured with questions from the scale developed by Taylor, Casten, and Flickinger (1993). The measure assessed mothers' perceptions for social support to their family from adult relatives ("people like your grandparents, aunts, or uncles") in the areas of advice and counseling, problem solving, and socializing. Sample questions presented to the respondents included, "We can count on our relatives for help when we have a problem." The participants indicated their answers using a Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree").

Family organization (28 items, alpha=0.84) was assessed with the Family Routines Inventory (Jensen, James, Boyce, & Hartnett, 1983), which measured the degree to which the family was organized and structured in its day-to-day operation. For this measure, mothers indicated the degree to which organization and daily routines were a part of family life. The respondents were read a statement describing a routine and asked to indicate whether it was characteristic of their family. Sample questions presented to the respondents included, "The family checks in and out with each other when someone leaves or comes home. Is this routine in

your family?" The participants indicated their answers on a response scale ranging from 1 ("almost never") to 4 ("almost every day").

Adolescent Variables

Self-Esteem (10 items, alpha=0.85) was assessed with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale measured the self-acceptance component of self-esteem. Sample questions presented to the respondents included, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." The responses ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree").

Self-Reliance (10 items, alpha=0.81) was measured using the Psychological Maturity Inventory (Greenberger, Josselson, Kneer, & Kneer, 1974). The measure assessed adolescents' sense of initiative and control over events and lack of dependency. Sample questions presented to the respondents included, "When I do something wrong, I depend on my parents to straighten things out for me." The response format for the measure ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree").

Problem behavior (15 items, alpha=0.88) was assessed by obtaining the adolescents' self-report on their frequency of involvement in delinquent activities, such as physical assault, drug use, and vandalism (Gold & Reimer, 1975). The responses ranged from 1 ("never") to 4 ("several times").

Psychological distress (20 items, alpha=0.88) was assessed using the Center for Epidemiological Studies (CES) Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). For this measure, the adolescents reported the frequency of mental or physical states (such as feelings of depression or loss of appetite, etc.) over the past month. The response scale for the measure ranged from 1 ("never") to 4 ("three or more times").

The recruitment of families took place in several steps. First, census tracts consisting primarily of Latino families were identified. Then, using a Coles directory to obtain addresses and phone numbers, all households were sent invitations to participate in a study of Puerto Rican

families and adolescents. All households that were sent invitations also received a call from the research staff explaining the nature of the study and inviting them to participate. Second, fliers describing the research were posted in local markets, recreation centers, and social services agencies requesting that interested individuals contact the research staff at our offices. Adolescents and parents who consented to participate in the study were interviewed individually, either in their homes or at the Laboratory for Student Success, based upon their convenience.

Spanish versions of the measures were produced and were used with those families that preferred to be interviewed in Spanish. The measures were translated to Spanish by bilingual graduate students in the Temple University Speech and Communication Department. The Spanish versions were also translated back into English to ensure the meaningfulness of the measures.

Analysis Plan

The conceptual model examined in this investigation postulated that family organization would mediate the relationship between social support from kin and adolescents' adjustment. Analyses followed Baron and Kenney's (1986) recommendations for testing mediating effects. First, the direct association between kinship support and the domains of adolescent adjustment assessed was examined. Second, it was determined whether the effects of kin support on adjustment were reduced or eliminated when family organizational practices were introduced. Finally, the associations between kinship support and family organization, and those between family organization and adolescent adjustment, were examined. Multiple regression techniques were used to conduct the analyses.

RESULTS

Analyses With Demographic Measures and Major Variables

The means and standard deviations of the major variables are shown in Table 1. The values found for this sample are quite similar to those found in published research (e.g., Taylor,

1996), with a socio-economically similar sample of African American families. Analyses of the relations between the demographic measures and the major variables revealed that family income was negatively associated with adolescents' psychological distress ($r=-0.16$, $p<0.03$). Also, adolescents in larger families were more likely to report lower self-reliance and independence ($r=0.24$, $p<0.003$). Adolescents with increasing age were more likely to report engaging in problem behavior ($r=0.31$, $p<0.001$) and more likely to report psychological distress ($r=0.20$, $p<0.04$). Finally, females were more likely than males to report psychological distress ($r=0.19$, $p<0.01$). In all analyses, the effects of family size, income, adolescents' age and gender were controlled by including them in the regression equations.

Kinship Support and Adolescent Adjustment

The first step in testing the conceptual model and the presence of mediated relations was to examine the association of kinship support with the measures of adolescent adjustment. Findings revealed that kinship support was positively linked to adolescents' self-reliance (beta=0.15, $p<0.05$). Also, greater support from kin was associated with lower levels of problem behavior (beta=-0.16, $p<0.05$).

Family Organization as Mediator

The second step in testing the conceptual model was to determine whether the significant relations of kinship support with adolescent adjustment were reduced or eliminated when family organization was entered into the equation. The results revealed that the relation of kin support to adolescents' self-reliance was essentially unchanged (beta=0.15 versus 0.17), indicating that mediation was not present. However, the association of kin support with adolescents' problem behavior was no longer present with family organization in the equation (beta=0.16 versus 0.09), indicating the presence of mediational relations. The regression findings predicting self-reliance and problem behavior are shown in Table 2.

Kinship Support and Family Organization

The test for mediational relations also requires that the predictor (e.g., kinship support) and proposed mediator (e.g., family organization) are significantly related. Results revealed that social support from kin was positively associated with family organization (beta=0.28, $p<0.001$).

Family Organization and Adolescent Adjustment

Finally, the presence of mediational relations requires that the mediator and dependent variables are significantly related. Findings revealed that family organization was positively associated with adolescents' self-reliance (beta=0.17, $p<0.02$). Also, family organization was negatively associated with problem behavior (beta=-0.24, $p<0.002$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this investigation are consistent with past research, suggesting the importance of social support to the functioning of Puerto Rican families and adolescents (Delgado & Rivera, 1997; Garcia-Coll et al., 1995). The findings also extend previous work by showing some of the areas of parenting and adolescent adjustment associated with support from kin. The results reveal that the more that mothers reported support from kin, adolescents were more self-reliant and less likely to report engaging in problem behavior. It is possible that in the context of greater support, involvement, and possibly supervision of kin, adolescents are permitted greater freedom than if their families were more socially isolated. Indeed, Furstenberg (1993) has shown that in some urban, inner city communities, parents employ relatives in other, relatively safer, neighborhoods as social outlets for their children and adolescents. A possible outcome of contact with relatives may be greater autonomy and lower dependence on parents.

The negative association of kin social support with adolescents' problem behavior appears to be an outcome of the positive association of kin social support with family organization. Findings reveal that the negative relation of kin social support with problem

behavior was mediated by the positive association of kin support with family organization. Families, apparently, are more likely to be organized and structured when they have the support of kin. And in turn, in more organized families, adolescents are less likely to engage in problem behavior. It is possible that in organized families adolescents have responsibilities and sufficient structured time that opportunities to engage in problem behavior are reduced. Family organization did not, however, mediate the association of kin support with self-reliance. Social support and family organization had independent effects on adolescents' self-reliance.

In addition to the negative association of family organization with problem behavior, in more organized families, adolescents report greater self-reliance and less dependence on parents. It is possible that as adolescents are given responsibilities in the home and required to account for their time in an organized household, they may develop a greater sense of self-reliance. This finding is in line with past results on the relations of family organization with aspects of adolescent adjustment (Taylor, 1996).

There are several limitations that should be noted when interpreting the findings. First, the data were based on the self-reports of mothers and adolescents. Objective observers might characterize the variables assessed in a different manner, and information from additional sources would help overcome such factors as efforts at impression management or lapses of memory that may influence self-report measures.

Second, the causal direction in the relations among the variables is uncertain. For instance, it is possible that support from kin enhances family organization. It is equally possible that families who are organized and structured are more likely to attract the support of other interested adults. Thus, these and other similar findings must be interpreted with caution. Longitudinal data are needed to examine the causal relations of the variables.

Finally, the sample was composed primarily of urban, economically disadvantaged Puerto Rican families. The results may not generalize to working- or middle-class Puerto Rican families living in suburban or rural settings.

In terms of directions for future research, there is an urgent need for research on the parenting beliefs and practices of Puerto Rican families and their links to adolescents' behavior. For example, research has shown that Puerto Rican families value dignity (*dignidad*), respect (*respecto*) and mutual help (*ayuda mutual*) (Lassiter, 1998). It is important to understand how parents attempt to rear their children to have these attributes. It is also important to understand how these qualities are associated with adolescents' well-being. For instance, personalism with respect to Puerto Rican families refers to the possession of personal qualities that promote an individual's sense of positive self-regard and acceptance without regard for "external or worldly success or failure" (Lassiter, 1998). For Puerto Rican families, research that examines the mechanisms linking parents' behavior or social support within the family to adolescents' adjustment is needed. Also, research that examines the factors that may act as moderators of behaviors and variables within families is needed. For example, the social support within families may be particularly important when there are members for whom Spanish is their primary language. In such families, the help and support of relatives may be especially important in interactions that must take place outside the home or community. Finally, research on how the larger social contexts within which families or family members interact (neighborhood, work, school) influence parenting and adolescent adjustment is needed.

TABLES

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of the Major Variables

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Kinship Support	17.46	2.64
Family Organization	43.19	5.89
Self-Esteem	25.27	3.89
Self-Reliance	35.44	3.33
Problem Behavior	18.62	4.53
Psychological Distress	17.30	10.51

Table 2

Regression of Self-Reliance and Problem Behavior on Social Support and Family Organization

Dependent Variable: Self-Reliance		
Rsquare=0.12	F=3.56**	Beta
Predictors		
Social Support		0.15*
Family Organization		0.17*
Family Size		0.13
Income		0.04
Adolescent Age		0.19*
Gender		0.01
Dependent Variable: Problem Behavior		
Rsquare=0.10	F=3.31**	Beta
Predictors		
Social Support		0.09
Family Organization		- 0.24**
Family Size		0.10
Income		0.04
Adolescent Age		0.19*
Gender		0.03

* p<0.05
** p<0.01

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